GEORGE WASHINGTON

An Image and Its Influence

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George Washington took office as president in 1789 with an asset of inestimable value. People viewed him as the hero of the American Revolution who, disdaining power, had like the Roman general Cincinnatus returned home to his farm. When he allowed himself, with great reluctance, to be nominated as chief executive, his prestige was unparalleled. Indeed, his reputation was worldwide. When he died,

Napoleon Bonaparte decreed that the standards and flags of the French army be dressed in mourning crepe. The flags of the British Channel Fleet were lowered to half-mast to honor the fallen hero. Talleyrand, the French minister of foreign affairs, ... [called] for a statue of Washington to be erected in Paris.[1]

Poets likewise sang his praises.

Washington achieved mythic status in his own lifetime, receiving poetic encomia from English poets as different as William Blake and Byron, who contrasted Washington favorably with the despotic Napoleon. ... His contemporaries were impressed by the fact that the general who led a successful revolution did not establish a personal dictatorship.[2]

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1 Matthew Spalding and Patrick J. Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), p. 189.

2 Michael Lind, ed., *Hamilton's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 99.

Were the effects of the influence that accompanied this prestige good or bad for liberty? This chapter shall endeavor to show that in two instances, these effects were bad; in one case, though, Washington's fame led to fortunate consequences for individual freedom. Washington, though not a principal author of the Constitution, supported calling a convention to revise the Articles of Confederation. At the convention itself, he strongly backed Madison's plans for centralized control.

On assuming power, Washington soon faced a division of opinion in his cabinet. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton was not satisfied with the centralization already achieved by the Constitution. He called for a national bank and a governmentally directed program of industrial development. Thomas Jefferson raised a decisive objection to Hamilton's proposal: Did it not entirely exceed the bounds of power granted the central government by the new Constitution? The constitutional issue did not faze Hamilton, who produced an analysis that granted the central government broad power to do whatever Hamilton thought best. In this conflict, Washington once again weighed in on the side of the centralizers.

In his Farewell Address, though, Washington at least partially redeemed himself, from a classical-liberal standpoint. He cautioned against America's involvement in European power politics, with which the United States had no concern. His warning against permanent alliances guided much of American foreign policy in the nineteenth century; and, in the

twentieth, opponents of the bellicose policies of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt appealed to it. Washington's prestige for once had beneficial results.

We have spoken of whether Washington's influence was "good" or "bad" for liberty. By what standard are these judgments made? This author writes from a classical-liberal perspective, in which the growth of government is viewed as an unmitigated disaster and expansionist foreign policy is resolutely opposed. Thus, "states' rights" receive support as against increases in federal authority, and wars, except in cases of exercising self-determination or repelling direct invasion, are opposed.[3]

One might object to the proposed criterion in this way. The goal of classical liberalism is to promote individual liberty. Why then tie it down to the specific policies indicated?

In certain cases, may not the federal government serve better to protect the individual than the states?[4] Further, even if local control is in ideal circumstances best, may not a decentralized polity prove no match for a strong opponent? Along the same lines, why must a realistic foreign policy be confined to defense

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3 A classical-liberal analysis of just wars has been well set forth by Murray Rothbard in "America's Two Just Wars: 1775 and 1861" in *The Costs of War*, John V. Denson, ed., 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999), pp. 119–33.

4 For a defense of this position, see Clint Bolick, *The Affirmative Action Fraud* (Washington, D.C.: The Cato Institute, 1996). See also my criticisms in *The Mises Review* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 13–17.

of the national territory? In some cases, may not the best defense be to strike at a prospective enemy first?[5]

These worries cannot be addressed in detail here. Suffice it to say that a good rule-utilitarian case can be constructed for spurning federal interventions that allegedly aim at promoting liberty. In like fashion, aggressive war shackles us with devastation and restriction of liberty in order to combat speculative dangers.[6]

These remarks have at least the appearance of dogmatism, and they are advanced rather to indicate a viewpoint than to make a case. One illustration of how such a case would proceed is taken from Murray Rothbard. The Articles of Confederation established a much less centralized system than the Constitution. Yet because ratification by all the states was required for the Articles to come into effect, most of the American Revolution was fought with no written structure of authority over the states at all. As Rothbard notes,

The Articles were not exactly received with huzzahs; rather, they were greeted quietly and dutifully, as a

5 Walter Lippmann opposed "isolationist" policy during the 1930s, charging it with unrealistically ignoring the increasing power of Germany. For a criticism of his views, see my "A Common Design: Propaganda and World War" in *The Costs of War*, John V. Denson, ed., 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999), pp. 312–19.

6 For a strong historical case showing that war has led to growth in government, see Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

needed part of the war effort against Britain. One of the keenest critiques of the Articles, as might be expected, came from Thomas Burke, who warned that, under cover of the war emergency, eager power-seekers were trying to impose a central government upon the states. ... [t]he Articles of Confederation were not to be ratified and go into effect until 1781, when the Revolutionary War would be all but over.[7]

So much for the supposed necessity for a strong central government to combat other nations.

However much supporters of localism might view even the Articles as going too far in the wrong direction, Washington held a decidedly different view. In 1783, he wrote to Alexander Hamilton: "It is clearly my opinion, unless Congress have powers competent to all general purposes, that the distresses we have encountered, the expense we have incurred, and the blood we have spilt, will avail nothing."[8]

Among the "distresses" of which Washington spoke, one may speculate that personal considerations loomed large. Throughout his adult life, Washington avidly sought land. "His family had first speculated in

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7 Murray N. Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty*, vol. 4, *The Revolutionary War, 1775–1784* (Auburn, Ala.: The Mises Institute, 1999), pp. 255–56. Donald W. Livingston argues that David Hume saw a confederation of small republics as the solution to the defense problem. Further, Livingston argues that Hume influenced the American founders. See his *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 317–32.

8 W.E. Woodward, *George Washington: The Image and the Man* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1962), p. 411.

Ohio Valley land decades ago [before the 1780s], and Washington owned nearly sixty thousand acres."[9]

A project that aroused his interest offered a chance to appreciate greatly the value of his land. "If a canal could be pushed over the mountains to link up with the Allegheny river system, then all the future produce of the Ohio Valley could flow through Virginia land, (not coincidentally, past Mount Vernon)."[10]

A crucial obstacle confronted Washington's hopes for a Potomac Canal. Under the Articles of Confederation, a state had the right to levy fees on the use of waterways that passed through its boundaries. If the states bordering the Potomac were to do so, the proposed canal might generate no profit for him. One can readily see why the great general was "distressed." As one observer notes, "[h]e was drawn to the plan by important private and public interests, and the political steps he took to fulfill it led directly to the Constitutional Convention, if not a canal."[11] A strong central government would remove the threat of interstate taxation.

This is not to suggest that Washington's economic interests determined his support for a stronger central government. To do so would be to fall into the fallacy that wrecked Charles Beard's An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution. Nevertheless,

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9 Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p. 49.

10 Ibid., p. 48.

11 Ibid., p. 49.

personal interest cannot be neglected in an explanation of Washington's policy.

Regardless of Washington's motives, the fact that someone of his probity and reputation advocated a Constitutional Convention eased the doubts of those who feared centralization. How could one suspect the proposed convention of aims destructive of liberty if Washington, the Cincinnatus who had spurned dictatorship, endorsed the call for it? Was not the case for the good intentions of the proposed convention conclusively made once it became known that Washington himself had agreed to serve as a delegate to it? Richard Brookhiser puts the essential point well:

Much of the political class was happy with the current arrangements. ... Supporters of change would have to make the case that a new government would not threaten liberty. ... Washington's presence would help immeasurably to make that case. He had already held more power than any man in America, and after eight and half years, he had surrendered it. He was the most conspicuous example of moderation and disinterestedness that the nation could supply.[12]

At the convention, Washington's primary aim was not to enact a particular plan of government. The need rather was to act immediately, so that centralization could be secured as fast as possible.

During the constitutional debates, Washington insisted that the Articles of Confederation be

12 Ibid., p. 56.

overhauled quickly. “Otherwise,” he wrote, “like a house on fire, whilst the most regular mode of extinguishing it is contended for, the building is reduced to ashes.” What was needed, Washington thought, was any solid national government.[13]

Washington was quite willing to push his argument to extremes. So essential did he deem centralization that he contemplated a monarchy for America, should the Constitutional Convention fail. He was not himself a monarchist—far from it. But a letter of March 31, 1787, to James Madison shows that conceivable circumstances might change him into one.

In his definitive study of James Madison’s political thought, Lance Banning summarizes Washington’s thoughts in this vital letter:

No one could deny the indispensability of a complete reform of the existing system, which he hoped the Constitutional Convention would attempt. But only if complete reform were tried, and the resulting system still proved inefficient, would a belief in the necessity of greater change begin to spread “among all classes of the people. Then, and not till then is my [Washington’s] opinion, can it [monarchy] be attempted without involving all the evils of civil discord.”[14]

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13 Russell Hardin, *Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 273, citing a letter from Washington to Henry Knox, February 3, 1787.

14 Russell Hardin, *Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 273, citing a letter from Washington to Henry Knox, February 3, 1787.

One wonders how those whose fears of the convention had been calmed by Washington's endorsement would have reacted had they known of this letter. But of course the convention, by its own lights, did not fail; and the fact that Washington contemplated monarchy remained hidden.

Any centralized form of government, Washington held, was desirable so long as it could be quickly established. But it does not follow from this that Washington was indifferent to the type of centralized government established. He soon fell in with the radical nationalism of Madison's Virginia Plan.

To Madison, Washington's presence at the convention was essential: It was "an invitation to the most select characters from every part of the Confederacy."[15] Madison reported that Washington arrived at the Philadelphia convention "amidst the acclamations of the people, as more sober marks of the affection and veneration which continue to be felt for his character."[16]

With Washington present, Madison hoped to achieve his aims. One political theorist, a disciple of Leo Strauss, summarizes these aims in this way: Washington's presence and the presence of "lesser figures of impeccable republican credentials allowed the convention to rebut the charge of being an

15 Gary Rosen, *American Compact: James Madison and the Problem of Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), p. 85, citing a letter from Madison to Washington, December 7, 1786.

16 Ibid., p. 86, citing a letter from Madison to Thomas Jefferson, May 15, 1787.

aristocratic conspiracy while conferring on it the opportunity to behave like one."[17]

Strong words, but the details of Madison's plans bear out the interpretation that the Straussian Gary Rosen has advanced. Madison and other extreme nationalists sought to eviscerate entirely the power of the states to thwart the will of the nation.

Under the Virginia Plan, which Madison submitted to Washington before the convention opened, Congress could veto any law enacted by a state legislature that it deemed unconstitutional.

It called, as Washington's summary of Madison's draft put it, for a "due supremacy of the national authority," including "local authorities [only] whenever they can be subordinately useful." ... Madison had originally called for an even more sweeping national power over state laws, a "negative in all cases whatever."[18]

In fairness to Washington, he did not vote in favor of Madison's radical proposal of an unlimited congressional veto. But neither did he oppose the plan. Madison noted that

Gen. W. was "not consulted." How could he not have been consulted? He never missed a session. Most probably, Gen. W. had been consulted privately, and the result of the consultation was that, since Madison

17 Ibid.

18 Brookhiser, *Founding Father*, p. 63.

had the voters anyway, Washington chose not to take a public stand on an inflamed issue.[19]

It seems quite clear that opposition by Washington would have at once ended so far-reaching a plan, but it was not forthcoming. Surely then he cannot have been very strongly against it. Had he been, he need only have spoken a word. But why speculate on Washington's private opinion of Madison's proposal? Its importance for our purposes is this: Many of those who feared that the convention would strike a fatal blow at states' rights were reassured by Washington's presence. But, unknown to them, he was at least a fellow traveler of radical centralism. His image as a Cincinnatus averse to power led many into error. It did not follow from Washington's personal reluctance to hold office that he was not an opponent of states' rights, as this concept was understood in the 1780s.

Fortunately, for those opposed to centralism, no version of the congressional veto survived into the Constitution's final draft. But the Constitution, even without it, was far more centralizing than the Articles; and Washington's image once again proved useful when the Constitution came up for ratification. Just as before, skeptics could be reassured: Would Washington support a regime inimical to liberty? Thus, in Virginia, opposition to the Constitution was in part disarmed by Washington's prestige. "Few, if any of Virginia's revolutionary leaders questioned Madison's republican credentials. All, no doubt, were

19 Ibid., p. 64.

comforted by their awareness that George Washington would head the federal government if it were put into effect."[20]

By no means is this meant to suggest a monocausal view, in which Washington's image sufficed to quell all opposition to the new document. Quite the contrary, in the very passage just cited, Lance Banning maintains that Madison's skill at argument was needed to win over the recalcitrant. Confidence in Washington was not enough because in 1788, "quite unlike today, few believed that the executive would set the federal government's directions."[21] Nevertheless, the importance of the "Washington-image factor" cannot be gainsaid.

The Constitution did not in all respects settle the nature of the American system. What sort of government would result from it? Would its provisions be interpreted loosely, to enable the central government to seize as much power from the states as possible? Two conflicting approaches to government split Washington's cabinet, one favored by Alexander Hamilton and the other by Thomas Jefferson.

These divergent views have been ably summarized by Forrest McDonald.

In Federalist Essay number 70, Hamilton had said that "energy in the executive is a leading ingredient in the definition of good government." ... In essays 71 and 73, he made his position clearer: "It is one thing,"

20 Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty*, p. 253.
21 Ibid.

he said, for the executive “to be subordinate to the laws, and another to be dependent on the legislative body.” In other words, the executive authority must operate independently and with a wide range of discretion in its field, the Constitution and laws providing only broad guidelines and rules.[22]

Jefferson and his followers saw matters entirely otherwise.

In Jefferson’s view, and that of most Republicans, such discretionary authority was inherently dangerous and smacked of monarchy. … A society would grow better … by stripping social and governmental institutions to the bare minimum so that the natural aristocracy might rise to the top.[23]

The differences between Hamilton and Jefferson were not confined to abstract argument, but quietly became manifest in practical affairs. Although Hamilton considered himself a student of economics, his views embodied the discredited doctrines of mercantilism.

One of the duties of the federal government, according to the Hamilton philosophy, is the active promotion of a dynamic industrial capitalist economy … by establishment of sound public finance, public investment in infrastructure, and promotion of new industrial sectors unlikely to be profitable in their early stages.

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22 Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of George Washington* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), pp. 94–95.

23 Ibid., pp. 95–96.

As Hamilton wrote in The Report on Manufactures:

Capital is wayward and timid in leading itself to new undertakings, and the state ought to excite the confidence of capitalists, who are ever cautious and sagacious, by aiding them to overcome the obstacles that lie in the way of all experiments.[24]

Where the State would acquire the requisite understanding to direct the economy, Hamilton neglected to inform his readers; and Jefferson and his followers were reluctant to take the matter on faith. In particular, the Jeffersonians rejected Hamilton's plan, as part of reforming public finance, to establish a national bank.

In this opposition they had a seemingly irrefutable argument. Hamilton's plan for a bank clearly violated the Constitution. Nowhere does that document give Congress the power to charter a national bank. So small a matter did not deter Hamilton from avid pursuit of his scheme.

In response to a request by Washington, Hamilton delivered a "Defense of the Constitutionality of the Bank" to him on February 23, 1791.

The well-known part of the defense spelled out the "loose constructionist" doctrine of the Constitution. The Constitution, said Hamilton, defined only in general terms the broad purposes for which the federal government was created. ... If Congress determined to achieve an end authorized by the

24 Lind, ed., *Hamilton's Republic*, p. 5, quoting Hamilton's Report.

Constitution, it was empowered by the final clause in Article I, Section 8 [the "necessary and proper" clause] ... to use any means that were not prohibited by the Constitution.[25]

Hamilton's argument by far exceeded in importance the matter of the bank, though that in itself was no small thing. If Hamilton's views were accepted, little of limited government could remain. Given the vaguest aims, for example, the promotion of "the general welfare," the government had the power, Hamilton alleged, to do whatever it thought was needed to attain them.

Faced with so blatant a challenge to constitutional rule, what did Washington do? He accepted Hamilton's opinion, refusing Madison's advance to veto the bank bill. Hamilton's "defense convinced Washington, and on February 25 [1791], he signed the bank bill into law."[26]

Once again Washington lent his prestige and authority to the cause of a strong central state. From a classical-liberal perspective, his course of action was a disastrous blunder.

But the record is not all black. So far Washington has been presented as an opponent of the libertarian tradition. He used his fame to secure unwarranted credence for a convention that aimed to strengthen the central government. At that convention, he gave the most extreme centralizers at least tacit support.

25 McDonald, *The Presidency of George Washington*, p. 77.
26 Ibid., p. 26.

And, as we have just seen, he accepted an argument that freed the government from all constitutional restraint. Nevertheless, from the classical-liberal perspective, Washington almost redeemed himself.

In his Farewell Address, Washington set forward principles of foreign policy that, if followed, would virtually immunize America from involvement in foreign wars. (The Address was not delivered as a speech. It was a circular published in The American Daily Advertiser, September 19, 1796.)[27]

In the Address, Washington sharply separated European affairs from those of the United States.

Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence therefore it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificialities, in ... the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships, or enmities.[28]

But, interventionists such as Walter Lippmann were later to object, does not the argument of the Address wrongly take for granted that European politics do not concern America? What if a single power dominated the continent? Would this not threaten us? If so, should we not be concerned actively to prevent such domination?

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27 Spalding and Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens*, p. 57. For the controversy about Hamilton's role in drafting the *Address*, see pp. 55ff.

28 Ibid., p. 186, quoting the text of the *Address*.

Washington rejected this contention in advance.

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. If we remain in one People, under an efficient government, the period is not far off, when we may defy material injury from external annoyance. . . . Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground.[29]

Here Washington adopts the much maligned Fortress America stance so derided by critics of isolation. Given the manifest perils of war, will not a classical-liberal system take advantage of a favorable geographic position to steer clear of foreign entanglements? Such, at any rate, was Washington's argument; and for once, his immense prestige aided the cause of liberty.[30]

Opponents of American entry into the world wars frequently appealed to the Address. If they were ultimately unsuccessful, at least the fame of the Address and its author helped slow the race toward war and statism.

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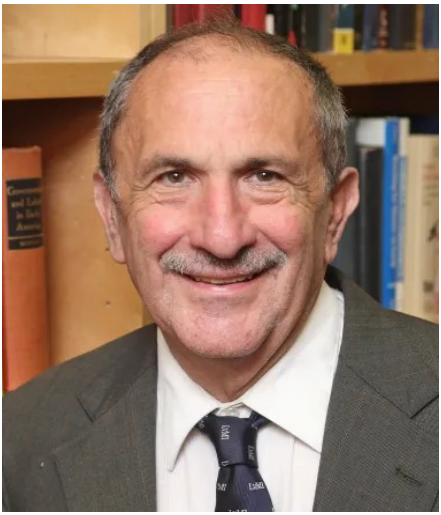
29 Ibid.

30 For a contemporary defense of the soundness of the foreign policy prescriptions of the *Address*, see Eric Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).



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